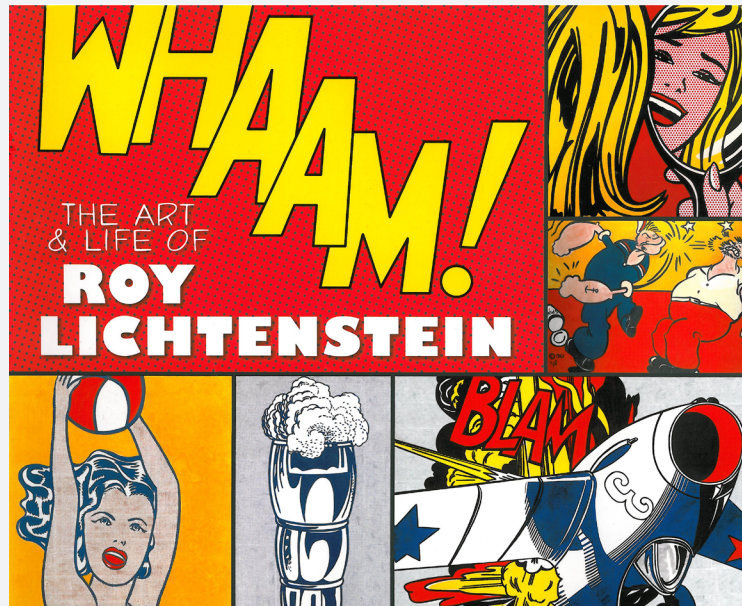


First Opinion: What is Art? Introducing Roy Lichtenstein

Rubin, Susan Goldman. *Whaam! The Art & Life of Roy Lichtenstein*. New York: Abrams, 2008.

Caroline Jones

Picture book biography can be a tricky genre in which to work, with inherent tensions among the depth of the subject, the youth and inexperience of the intended audience, and the brevity of the format. Susan Goldman Rubin, with her background and experience in art and artist biography, negotiates these tensions with aplomb, bringing to her subjects rich and nuanced historical perspective. In *Whaam! The Art & Life of Roy Lichtenstein*, she offers a portrait of the artist more than the man, emphasizing his artistic process, inspiration, and influences; consequently, the book becomes an introduction to Pop Art and art culture.



Rubin does not, of course, neglect biography; in fact, she offers anecdotal stories about the boy Roy, several gleaned from interviews with Lichtenstein's younger sister, Renée. Readers learn of Roy's affection for science fiction radio shows and comic strips (*Flash Gordon* and *Buck Rogers*), and Rubin speculates that those early influences manifested later in Lichtenstein's art. Readers learn also of Roy's early passion for art, his decision to train to teach as well as to practice, and his military service at the end of World War II, all experiences that eventually appear in the artist's work.

While the question "What is art" is foregrounded throughout the text—earlier probed by Lichtenstein and art critics of his time—Rubin asks her readers to accept that whatever we may decide "art" actually is, Lichtenstein's work qualifies without fully exploring this conclusion. Defining art shapes her depiction of the shift in popular and critical perceptions of what makes art: a shift that included and embraced the incorporation of and

commentary on icons of popular culture. Rubin mentions Andy Warhol as Lichtenstein's contemporary in the Pop Art movement while highlighting the differences in their creative processes.

The forty-eight pages are text-heavy, indicating an intended audience of primarily independent readers. This is sometimes complicated with awkwardly-simplistic literary constructions. Phrases such as "said Roy" or "recalled Renée" are a bit cumbersome, as are a few expository sentences: "His son David Hoyt was born and named for Roy's professor" (10); "[t]hroughout his life he had enjoyed making things" (32); and as a descriptor for one of his mannequin head sculptures: "*Head with Blue Shadow* [...] resembles a pretty girl" (32). These awkward bits are, however, small irritants in an otherwise effective work.

The text is balanced by at least one illustration on each double-page spread, altogether an impressive total of thirty-nine pictures. These images are comprised primarily of Lichtenstein's own work, but also included are photographs of the artist himself—particularly as a boy and young man, reproductions of paintings by other artists who influenced him, and images of the artist's source material. The images are closely tied to the text, offering examples not simply of the works under discussion, but of the artistic styles and processes that Rubin so effectively explains as fundamental to Lichtenstein's body of work and artistic development.

Artist biographies can be especially effective as picture books, and Lichtenstein's work lends itself beautifully to this format. Each two-page spread features his signature Benday dot background, black on white on text pages, with shades of red, yellow, and blue as background for images. The entire format relies on bold primary colors, complementing and strongly evoking Lichtenstein's style. *Whaam! The Art & Life of Roy Lichtenstein* is effectively conceived; form and function serve each other admirably in Rubin's discussion of Lichtenstein's evolution of style and his distinctive processes. Juxtapositions of original images with Lichtenstein's representations of those images allow viewers to make their own connections between source material and Lichtenstein's work.

Clearly, *Whaam!* is intended as an introduction, a first step in what the author hopes will be a lifetime's journey for her readers. The final pages of the book offer myriad possibilities for that next step with an impressive collection of reference material, including a glossary of terms, page-by-page notes on source material, a list of references and resources with special notations of material suitable for younger readers, a list of "Museums & Public Places Where You Will Find Work by Roy Lichtenstein," and even an index.

Whaam! joins Rubin's similar biographies of Matisse, Magritte, Warhol, Jacob Lawrence, Edward Hopper, and Wayne Thiebaud. Her work accessibly and engagingly opens traditional definitions and understandings of art and artists to child (and adult) readers; Lichtenstein's life, as man and artist, opens the reader's understanding of multiple facets of art and the artistic process.

Work Cited

Rubin, Susan Goldman. "Books in Print." Web. 19 Mar. 2009. <<http://www.susangoldman-rubin.com/index2.html>>.

About the Author

Caroline E. Jones received her M.A. in English with a specialization in children's literature at Hollins College in Roanoke, Virginia, and her Ph.D. in English Studies at Illinois State University. She teaches courses in children's and adolescent literature in the English department at Texas State University-San Marcos.